

Carbondale

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Its name leaves no doubt. Unlike other coal towns – Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, and Hazleton, for example – Carbondale proclaims flat-out what put it on the map of Northeastern Pennsylvania.



Anthracite coal had yet to be widely accepted as an efficient fuel for either domestic or commercial purposes when the two Wurts brothers from Philadelphia acquired large land holdings in the northern part of old Luzerne County. In the 1820s they began to extract coal from outcroppings in the Carbondale area, taking it to market in New York and Philadelphia by circuitous routes.

To meet the gradually increasing demand for anthracite, these entrepreneurial brothers realized they had to tap the rich veins of coal beneath the surface. Of necessity, they recruited miners from abroad.

Legend has it that they enlisted Welsh preachers to deliver a message promising better living conditions and higher wages for those of their countrymen who were willing to give up mining in Wales for mining in Carbondale.

My great-great-grandfather William Maxey was one such recruit. He and his family lived in the coal region of South Wales, which was subject to recurrent labor unrest and its armed suppression. It is impossible to imagine the daily hardships and danger they endured which persuaded him at the advanced age of fifty to leave the country of his birth.

Nor do I have anything of his in writing to help me because both my great-great-grandparents, William and Jane Jones Maxey, were at the most semi-literate, able possibly to read but not to write. In the chapel registry recording their marriage in 1805, they both signed their names with an X.

Indeed, the recording clerk showed some hesitancy about how to spell the Maxey name, which was not a familiar Welsh patronymic.

William Maxey and his two older sons, John and David, who as boys had early joined their father working in the mines, arrived in Carbondale in 1832. Four years later David returned to Wales to escort his mother and younger siblings to their new home in Carbondale. The five of them crossed the ocean in May, 1836, as passengers listed on the *Ship Albion* out of

Bristol.



How much of a change did Carbondale represent in the lives of my ancestors? They had put behind them the intensive mining and rapid industrialization Wales was undergoing to enter a rough-and-tumble frontier community just beginning to emerge from the surrounding wilderness. New churches and taverns were springing up in seeming synchronization. When I try to picture the turmoil that they confronted as Carbondale pioneers, I am tempted to draw parallels to the Wild West depicted in old cowboy films.

At mid-century Irish immigrants followed the Welsh to Carbondale, giving rise to tension between two competing Celtic tribes that sometimes erupted into open conflict. Of that uneasy relationship, I may claim a particular perspective since, by good fortune, I am also the descendant of Irish great-grandparents who came to Carbondale in that second wave of immigration.

We speak of the “melting pot” as metaphor to signify the success of the American experiment in integrating nationalities and ethnicities. Yet the process of assimilation was far from instant. It took time and adjustment. In some respects, I believe it would be more accurate to refer to the “simmering pot.”

A third wave of immigration occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century. It would further test the process of assimilation in mining communities like Carbondale. By then many of the children of the Welsh and Irish immigrants had achieved a secure enough footing to escape the mines. Replacement workers arrived from Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Lithuania, and the Ukraine. Each of these nationality groups sought to establish its own church and preserve its own language and culture.

For me Carbondale had been a place I often passed through on my way some ten miles northward to Forest City, a small coal town where my two sets of grandparents raised their children, and to a nearby lake outside town where they vacationed together every summer. I never stopped to consider my Maxey family connections with Carbondale. As far as I knew, these ancestors of mine had long ago vanished from sight and recollection.

Not entirely, though. A friend called one day to point me in the direction of the Maplewood Cemetery on the north side of Carbondale where she had identified several Maxey gravestones. When I subsequently visited that cemetery, it was in sad disrepair, overgrown with brush and with many of its gravestones toppled over. I counted numerous Welsh names – Daniels, Davies, Davis, Jones, Lewis, Williams, etc. – before I finally located the Maxey family gravesite my friend had alerted me to. Still standing upright were two weather-worn monuments to William Maxey, who died in 1859, and his wife, Jane Jones Maxey, who died five years later.

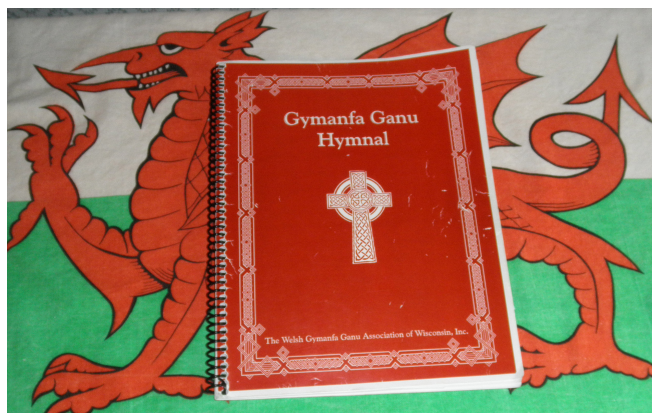


That discovery stirred the historian in me. Could I find anything more of my Maxey ancestors in Carbondale? Was life for William Maxey and his family unremitting toil? Did they regret the trade of mining in Wales for mining in Carbondale? How strong a hold did my great-great-grandfather's Welsh heritage continue to have on him?

I couldn't answer all these questions, but, thanks to the resources of the Internet, I was able to form a clearer impression of this immigrant family than I had any right to expect. In a search online I came upon the Reverend David Jones's *Memorial Volume of Welsh Congregationalists in Pennsylvania, U.S.A.: Their Churches, Periodical Convocations, Clergy and Prominent Lay Members*, published in 1934. Miraculously, the vivid memory of my great-great-grandfather had lasted among his fellow Welshmen seventy-five years after his death – and in a way that especially pleased me. He was, in a word, a character.

“William Maxey,” the Reverend Jones reported, “was one of the original true whole-hearted Welshmen who came to Carbondale early in its history.” Much as in African-American congregations today, the members of the Welsh Congregational Church “were very responsive when touched by the prayers, testimonies, and discourse delivered by preachers and others,” giving encouraging expressions of consent in repeated shouts of “Amen.” William Maxey was a prominent member of the “Amen Corner,” but his interventions were not always in support of the preacher he was listening to.

An annual meeting of the Gymanfa took place in Carbondale in 1846. The Gymanfa is a religious hymn-singing festival that in Wales was traditionally held every Easter Monday.



It remains an annual occasion for rallying the Welsh in song wherever they may be. I confess that, to the embarrassment of my Welsh forebears, I am hopeless when it comes to singing of any kind.

William Maxey was memorably present at the Gymanfa in 1846. A

visiting clergyman spoke at a service in which he compared the great plan of salvation to a railroad train powered by a “divine locomotive” that pulled a set of auxiliary cars, each of which had a designated role in rescuing the sinner.

So far, so good. Railroads had recently become a compelling symbol of improvement. My great-great-grandfather was vocally ready to climb on board the train to salvation – that is, until the preacher veered off course and introduced his listeners to the last railroad car, the Temperance Society, newly organized “for the purpose of making drunken men sober, and of putting saloons out of existence.” When he announced that “John the Baptist is the engineer” and urged his audience “without delay to jump onto the train,” William Maxey fell ominously silent.

After the service concluded, the ministers went to the Maxey house to have refreshments – “he and his wife,” the Reverend Jones reported, “being always exceedingly hospitable.” At the table, the conversation turned again to the evils of drink, at which point William Maxey made his views known: “I know better, when I am drilling in the mines and the coal dust almost choking me, a drink of beer is very refreshing, and when I come home in the evening after a hard day’s work it is very satisfying to have a drink of it.”

When the preacher persisted and said that his host risked church disownment, he got this pushback: “You can’t do it, my boy. I was a member of the church of Penmain [the specific location in Wales he came from] before you were born, and before there was any talk of temperance. I have never been drunk, and you cannot do anything with me.”

From this source, I know that in 1846 my ancestor was still working in the mines. (In fact, he appears as a miner in the census of 1850 for Carbondale, at the age of sixty-seven.) From this same source, I know that he stayed attached to Welsh traditions. It also brings me pleasure to learn that he and his wife had a reputation for being hospitable. Finally, I like the view of him as an eccentric, willing to resist the orthodoxy of the day, especially when it challenged the therapeutic value of drink.

The Internet – this time via Ancestry.com – has provided a last glimpse of William Maxey in Carbondale. He left a will dated May 3, 1859, signing his name again with an X. About seven months later he died, and his will was probated in Wilkes-Barre, Luzerne County; it would be almost another twenty years before Carbondale became part of newly formed Lackawanna County, having its county seat in Scranton.

The existence of a will surprised me. I underestimated William Maxey. I did not think he had enough property to justify leaving a will, much less one prepared by a lawyer. He began by instructing that “my body be decently buried adjoining the grave of my only daughter in the Protestant Cemetery in the City of Carbondale and that my funeral be conducted in a measure corresponding with my estate and situation in life.” We may be confident that those words expressed his intention, although they were obviously not his own. Later on in the will, he would make provision about his wife’s joining him in the cemetery, specifying that “she should be interred decently by my side and that our graves shall be strongly and safely fenced in and that a neat Italian Tomb Stone or Tablet be placed at the head of our graves.”

It took a studied effort to dispose of “such worldly estate as it hath pleased God to entrust me with.” He did not have a large estate, but neither was it an inconsequential one. The will was needed, among other things, to sort out the several loans he had made to friends and members of his family, of which he had somehow kept strict account.

William Maxey owned a house on a double lot in Carbondale.

Reading his will, I was able for the first time to locate his house; it was, he said, “in the rear of the Roman Catholic Church.” Did assembling at the Maxey house in 1846, in close proximity to St. Rose of Lima Church, where my Irish-Catholic great-grandparents attended Sunday Mass, give those Welsh preachers any measurable discomfort? How did they react, I wondered, to the ringing of the evening angelus bell?

In his final bequest, William Maxey left \$100 [about \$3000 in today’s money] to the Welsh Congregational Church in Carbondale “for the supporting of the preaching of the Gospel of my blessed Savior in the Welsh language.” So here I have still another sign of a Welsh-speaker, devoted to the Welsh language and his Welsh heritage.

Is there a lesson in all of this for me to acknowledge? I think so. It has led me to appreciate my immigrant origins, to see my Welsh ancestors as persevering in their trials and labor, whether in the country of their birth or in their adopted country.



When I next find myself passing through Carbondale, I will have reason to stop and reflect on the long hard journey through life that ended there.

